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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR KDEM SA

SUBJECT: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP VISITS KING ABDULAZIZ CENTER FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The U.S. delegation to the U.S. - Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue's Human Development Working Group (HDWG), led by Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS), Near East Affairs (NEA), Scott Carpenter, met with representatives of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue on December 4, 2006. Secretary General Faisal bin Abdul Rahman bin Muaammar emphasized that the goal of the National Dialogue is to increase public participation on issues of national importance while combating extremism. There have been six National Dialogues to date, with the most recent on educational reform. This Dialogue was conducted in all 13 provinces with 800 - 1,000 participants in each region representing a range of views. Faisal pointed out that several ministries are working to expand participation in the National Dialogue process, but it is still unclear how the results of the Dialogue fit with national policy. Another Dialogue representative insisted that Islamic principles need to be protected from personal interpretations by teachers who then pass these philosophies to students. He claimed that extremism has "different roots," mentioning specifically both Palestine and Iraq. Faisal stated that priorities sometimes conflict. "We want safety and economic prosperity," he said, "and you want democracy." He pointed out that the "best ambassadors" are those Saudis who studied in the U.S. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The U.S. delegation to the U.S. - Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue's Human Development Working Group (HDWG), led by Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS), Near East Affairs (NEA), Scott Carpenter, met with representatives of the King Abdulaziz Center National Dialogue on December 4, 2006. Secretary General Faisal bin Abdul Rahman bin Muaammar led

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the discussion, noting that the Center was established in 2003 to encourage dialogue on the range of issues and to facilitate national unity. He emphasized that the goal of the National Dialogue is to increase public participation on issues of national importance while combating extremism -- all in the context of Islam. There have been six National Dialogues to date, with the most recent having just concluded. The Dialogues have focused on a number of themes, including national unity and the role of scholars, extremism, women in Saudi society, youth issues, the national viewpoint for dealing with world cultures ("We and the Others"), and educational reform.

¶3. (C) Faisal explained that the most recent Dialogue on educational reform was conducted in all 13 provinces with 800 - 1,000 participants in each region representing a range of

views. He pointed out that several ministries are working to expand participation in the National Dialogue, including the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which reaches out to the imams, and the Ministry of Culture and Information, which has a project to "spread the culture of dialogue" through the mass media. He emphasized that the King is very receptive to broad participation in the Dialogue -- expecting both men and women to play a role. "We need to solve our problems," emphasized Faisal, "not just discuss them."

¶4. (C) Insisting that the Saudis suffer from terrorism "every single day," Faisal complained "our reputation has been hijacked by 'some' people." He insisted that the "silent majority" is moderate in nature and that the Dialogue represents popular opinion. However, he noted, there are those who feel that their "words did not get out of the room." He described the Dialogue as an effort to bridge the gaps that exist within Saudi society, explaining that "the word does not get out" because it is still unclear how the results of the Dialogue fit with national policy.

¶5. (C) Faisal stated that results of the most recent Dialogue on education will help Saudis meet the needs of the 21st century. He described the Dialogue's preliminary findings -- that the Saudi educational system currently has gaps in such areas as the natural sciences and vocational training and skills. The general level of education, he said, does not correspond with the Kingdom's religious and economic stature.

¶6. (C) National Dialogue representative Fahd al Sultan pointed out that policies, goals, and curricula are especially important. He stated technical relationships are being developed with other entities such as businesses and schools. He also indicated that there were direct, televised discussions among the ministries, students, and teachers in order to facilitate a better mutual understanding of the

current situation. Faisal added that "change needs to be from within."

¶7. (C) He continued that there needs to be sensitivity to the fact that Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country and that the principles of Islamic teachings are fundamental to Saudi culture. However, he emphasized "we do not want personal views here," explaining that that Islamic principles need to be protected from personal interpretations by teachers that are then spread to the students. He claimed that extremism has "different roots," mentioning specifically both Palestine and Iraq. However, he agreed, "we have to look at the whole." Ahmed Saifel Dain added that the problem is not the curricula per se, rather recent events in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan -- and individuals' grievances with those actions. He charged that U.S. efforts in Iraq "reawakened extremism." Faisal stated that is a mistake to expand democracy by force, suggesting that "democracy has been bought by blood."

8.(C) DAS Carpenter noted that leadership is necessary for effective dialogue, observing that media reporting on death and destruction tends to eclipse the positive results of efforts by such entities as the National Dialogue. Faisal countered that the National Dialogue is impacting the news, noting that priorities sometimes conflict. "We want safety and economic prosperity," he stated, "and you want democracy."

¶9. (C) In response to the question of how best to bridge these gaps, Faisal said that the "best ambassadors" are those individuals who studied in the U.S. Dain noted that, as the "center of Arabism," change must come from within the Kingdom. Faisal added that dialogue with Saudis needs to expand beyond the "same faces, same people" who participate in the various fora because they are not always necessarily the people who "need it." He continued that many lost faith in the U.S. as a result of "the total mess in Iraq," and insisted that the U.S. needs an "image make-over."